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Angolan, Afghan guerrillas to receive Stinger missiles

By Bill Gertz
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An administration program to give Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to resistance fighters in Angola and Afghanistan is "well underway," an administration official confirmed yesterday.

The official said the program marks a significant step forward in the so-called "Reagan doctrine" of supporting anti-communist resistance forces around the world.

"With the delivery of those weapons, the psychological barrier against giving American weapons has been broken," the official said.

Even though some administration officials wanted to supply even more of the missiles than was approved, and wanted to send them to three additional resistance forces, the Stinger decision sets an important precedent for directly supplying American-made weapons, administration and congressional sources said.

One source said some officials were pushing also to supply the resistance fighters in Angola and Afghanistan with TOW [tube-launched, optically tracked, wire guided] anti-tank missiles.

Undersecretary of State Michael Armacost yesterday declined to comment on the Stinger shipments, citing the administration policy of not commenting on intelligence matters.

"I will say that the doctrine or disposition of the administration is to furnish support for indigenous sources of resistance to outposts of Soviet influence that were established in the 1970s through the direct or indirect use of their own military force," Mr. Armacost said on "Meet the Press," an NBC television program.

"The means that are used, those are matters that have to be judged in each individual case," he said. "But we provide that support for both practical and principled reasons."

Until the Stinger shipments were approved, U.S. officials opposed sending advanced American-made

weapons to resistance groups getting American support. Instead, obsolete or foreign-made weapons purchased on the international arms market were supplied, to keep United States involvement secret.

The shoulder-fired Stinger anti-aircraft missiles — made by General Dynamics — are infrared targeting devices that home in on jet or helicopter engines flying up to six miles away.

The Stingers are less vulnerable to Soviet electronic warfare countermeasures than the less accurate Soviet- and Chinese-made SAM-7 anti-aircraft rockets that have been supplied to the Afghan mujahideen fighters in the past. The SAM-7s reportedly have been ineffective against Soviet MiG jet fighters and Mi-24 Hind attack helicopters, also known as "flying tanks."

A major factor in the decision to ship the new missiles was the intensified Soviet effort to subdue the Afghan freedom fighters, said the administration official, who declined to be named.

He said the new missiles — which will require trainers to demonstrate how to use them — are a morale booster for anti-communist forces since Stingers are regarded as a "status symbol."

"The resistance is trying to match what the Soviets do. But often by the time they get the newer weapons, the Soviets have widened their defense perimeters," he said.

Another administration official, however, believes the decision to limit the number of Stingers to "several hundred" and only to Angola and Afghanistan sets back the Reagan doctrine.

The official said the approved Stinger program fell short of an original plan to deliver several thousand of the advanced missiles to support insurgencies in five Soviet-backed states.

"The original concept was that there were five countries with freedom fighters who would receive several thousand stingers, total," said one senior administration official who declined to be named. "Now

three of the countries were removed, and the numbers have been reduced to less than 10 percent of the original proposal."

The official said he believed leaked intelligence reports about the new shipments were part of an effort to derail the covert program by making it appear that several hundred Stingers represent a major escalation of U.S. arms deliveries.

Other insurgent groups slated in the original request to get the advanced weapons included resistance forces in Nicaragua and Cambodia, the official said, but he did not name the fifth country on the original list.

In a July 1985 speech before the United Nations, however, President Reagan said the United States is committed to supporting anti-communist forces in Ethiopia if diplomatic negotiations fail.

The official noted that the number of Stingers shipped to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA forces and Afghan mujahideen fighters will not provide enough military power to shoot down large numbers of armored Soviet helicopter gunships or ground attack jets.

"Although they are much more accurate than SAM-7s, the success rate of Stingers is 3 or 4 to 1 — it takes four Stingers to destroy a Hind or a MiG-23," the official said.

The Pentagon's latest assessment of Soviet military capabilities, published last week in Soviet Military Power, states that Soviet army deployments in Afghanistan have introduced new weapons systems "with greater mobility and increased lethality."

Besides adding several thousand "Spetsnaz" special forces troops, new Soviet equipment deliveries include new armored personnel carriers, multiple rocket launchers and self-propelled artillery.

"The introduction of these systems has largely offset recent improvements in mujahideen weaponry," the publication states.

One Senate source, who declined to be named, said pressure for supplying the Stingers came from a group of Senate conservatives.